

## Front Page Layout and Reading Paths: the Influence of Age on Newspaper Reading

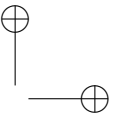
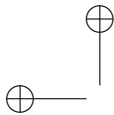
Zara Pinto Coelho

*Communication and Society Research Centre, University of Minho, Portugal*

E-mail: zara@ics.uminho.pt

PORTUGUESE newspapers, as many other European newspapers, are becoming increasingly visual. Even in the so-called quality newspapers printed pages look less dense than they used to be, have less text, more photos and colours and their front page layouts are organised according to the visual logic of the screen. In spite of this movement towards the visual, one of the features that it still is a sign of the difference between a quality paper and a popular one is the predominance of written text. However, the verbal element has been transformed into display, meaning that also language has become, largely, visual. These changes in newspapers layout are not mere formal changes. They imply new ways of combining the written text with visual components and new forms of semiotic organisation that influence the way newspapers are read and that contribute to create new kinds of readers. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1998), many newspapers layouts do not prescribe a clear sequence of reading or a reading path to their readers, and this relative openness of newspapers layout gives the reader the possibility of choosing a strategy of reading. Age is one of the factors that may explain this choice, as differences of age imply variations on reading practices and habits, and therefore different dispositions towards the newspaper pages (Kress, 2003: 165). Those who have been trained by the screen may be disposed to read a relatively less open page – as the ones of quality newspapers, when compared to the tabloids’ – according to the principles of the visual logic; and the opposite might happen: those who have been socialised into the older forms of textual organisation have to deal with tabloid newspapers.

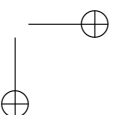
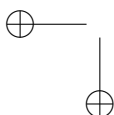
In this paper my purpose is to test the hypotheses laid down by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1998) against readers’ actual interaction with newspapers front pages. Quality and tabloid newspapers have different front pages layouts, which relate to the nature of their readership and to the wider national context. Although they are subject to changes over time, they also show some



regularities and conventions (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). My experiment involved three front pages from Portuguese “quality press”, and two front pages from the tabloid press, published in the first week of December 2004. In this article, for reasons of limited space, and also because excluded data shows similar reading behaviours, I only focus on one quality and one tabloid newspapers: *Jornal de Notícias*, the most read Portuguese newspaper, and *24 Horas*, one of the most read Portuguese tabloids (see figures 1 and 2). This choice means a reduction of the number of the readers under scrutiny, from 32 to 16: 8 adults (forty to fifty-five years-old), and 8 young readers (fifteen to eighteen years-old). I present two different analyses of the front pages layouts. First, I describe the layouts using the social semiotic approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), and the way it sets out particular reading paths to the ideal reader. This analysis was done prior to the experiment with the readers, and therefore without any previous knowledge of the empirical results. The plausible encoded reading paths are constructed according to the relative salience of the different elements featuring in the front page. In a second moment, I analyse the data provided by the simultaneous verbal protocols used to register page descriptions by looking at the spatial order in which the different areas attract attention. My aim is to look for regularities both on entry points and on reading paths on each group, and to compare their order of reading.

## A Social Semiotic Approach

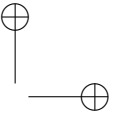
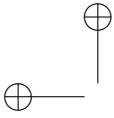
While there are a potentially infinite number of readings, reading practices are not all random or merely individualistic (Kress, 1989). Every reading involves some reconstitution of the text that follows the discursive history of the reader, her or his knowledge of genres, and her or his location within a set of discourses, related to factors such as race, gender or age. There are also formal features in the “text itself” and in a genre that impose specific limits on possibilities of reading and on the reconstruction of the text. Every text is produced with an ideal reader in mind, providing thus a certain reading position to the real viewer. When buying a certain newspaper, the reader has already positioned her/himself in a whole system of texts, of genres, of discourses, i.e., in a ‘reading formation’ (Kress, 1989: 36). However, the reader may not



yet be the text's ideal reader, due to cultural or social differences, and can make a resistant reading, therefore reconstructing the text in a more deeply way.

As stated above, newspapers front pages layouts do not code a reading path in a strict way, so the act of reading this kind of page is better described as scanning. Readers grasp the front page visually as a whole and make decisions about "entry points". Thus, in scanning the page the reader will follow a certain reading path, that is, she or he will establish an order of reading, setting up connections between the different elements that compose the page, relating them to each other in terms of their relative importance (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998). There are several empirical studies within the cognitive framework, based on eye-tracking, that focused on whether newspapers are read or scanned; their results offer strong evidence of the scanning process on newspaper reading (e.g. Garcia and Starck, 1991; Holsanova, Holmqvist and Rahm, 2005). In these studies readers usually enter the page (not necessarily the front page) through the dominant photo and then move to a prominent headline or another dominant photo. These studies are all concerned with layout questions, such as the position of various graphical elements on a page, the role of photographs versus text, or the role of colour in the layout.

The fact that the semiotic features do not prescribe an order of reading does not mean that their choice is random, nor is the way they are placed in the visual space. They have meanings that are not dependent upon a reading order. In the layout's case, they serve to integrate the various elements of the page, bringing them together into a coherent and meaningful whole. In order to analyse the semiotics of composition, the social semiotic approach underlines three main interrelated components: information value, salience and framing. The information value component deals with the positioning of elements in a layout and with the different values that they thus acquire in relation to each other. It follows three interrelated dimensions: horizontal dimension, vertical dimension and centre-margin dimension. On the horizontal dimension, features placed on the left side are endowed with the meaning of "given", the well-established, while those placed on the right-side with the meaning of new information. In the vertical dimension, elements placed on the top are presented as ideal, that is, as the generalised essence of the information; as we go down the page, towards the lower sections, information gradually becomes more specific or more practical. The third dimension of vi-



sual structuring is done along the dimensions of centre and margin, by placing the most important information in the centre and less important information in its flanks. But layout also involves giving different degrees of salience or weight to semiotic elements of the page, and therefore creating a hierarchy of importance among them. The greater the weight of an element, the greater is its salience. Salience is the result of a combination of factors: size, contrasts in tonal value or colour, differences in sharpness of focus, placement in the visual field, and also specific cultural factors, such as the appearance of a human figure or another strong cultural symbol.

## **Layouts of *Jornal de Notícias* and *24 Horas* Front Pages**

### **Front page of *Jornal de Notícias***

The layout of *Jornal Notícias* front page (see figure 1) has a predominantly vertical structure, consisting of three columns, separated by empty spaces between them. The one in the middle, the largest, is acting as the centre, that is, as the place around which all other elements are arranged in concentric layers. The central space has an internal structure. It displays on the top, under the masthead – symbol of the paper's identity and mission – the main headline of the day. This headline is regularly about the day's public event, national or international, and its form is very eye-catching due to the font size and style (large black capitals against a white background). The bottom of the central space features a coloured and salient photo that may have its own headline, or that may function as a complement to the main headline. In some editions the photo placed at the central space may have a bigger size and cover all the central space of the page.

The column in the right is connected in a subtle way with the middle section by colour rimes and black bold lettering on the headline. This produces a rectangular space in the centre that comprises also smaller headlines of news articles, mixing public events with private ones. There is another section on the left, and two others that form framing bands horizontally, one at the top, and the other at the bottom of the page. The left section consists of a list of items to be read on the sections that organise the content inside, and comprises a colourful picture showing a Japanese football fan of a Portuguese team. Usually, one or two of the headlines of the left section are made more

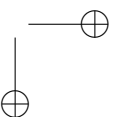
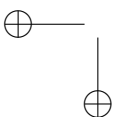
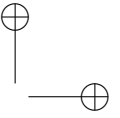
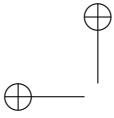


Figure 1: *Front page of Jornal de Notícias*

salient by the use of black bold and bigger lettering. Through these visual means a discrete thematic continuity between the centre and the left-side of the page is created. The same visual strategy is used to connect the top part and the middle section of the newspaper. The band at the top features another black main headline together with a colourful photo of the politician responsible for the statement transcribed. Between this upper band and the middle section, there is a section with the masthead of the newspaper, which has a greater salience due size and contrast of colours (blue, red and white). This section is sided by a smaller box on the right, consisting of coloured ads. The band at the bottom also features a coloured ad, something that seems to be frequent for ads among Western newspapers (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998).



The middle section is the most graphically salient space of the *Jornal de Notícias* front page. The salience is also an effect of the contents selected for this section: generally public events that are presented as the most crucial, the ones the reader should pay more attention to. The big coloured photo placed on the bottom of the middle section features Sampaio, the Portuguese President, on a meeting with the Government. The situation concerns the dissolution of the Portuguese Parliament and probably new elections, a factor that may increase the salience of the middle section due to cultural factors. If we take as a point of departure that the graphically salient elements will attract attention in the first place, it is plausible to assume that even a traditional reader would enter this page by choosing one of the central items, probably the main headline at the top of the middle section; then the reader would go down to the coloured photo of Sampaio, and then up to the items on the right, following a linear reading path within the central visual space. It also could be the case that the reader would enter the page through the main headline, going across to the headline on the right, down to the picture and up to the headlines on the right. Or, in the case of a football fan reader, the entry point could be the photo of the Japanese football fan on the left of the middle, going to the main headline, and from here to the headline on the right, following also a linear reading order. What kind of reading strategy would a younger reader choose?

### Front page of 24 Horas

The visual composition of *24 Horas* front page (see figure 2) is structured in a horizontal way, along the dimensions of centre and margins. The elements that flank the centre are not around, but on the top and on the bottom of the page, forming two horizontal bands on the top, and one at the bottom. These bands, however, are not symmetric and they are slightly disconnected due to a difference in background colours, or due to the use of empty spaces. They are also weakly framed, and the headlines or photos displayed on the right side of the bottom can enter the space of the centre, and the other way round. The upper band is the ideal and the lower band is the place of the real. This same kind of structure is used in the space of the middle section.

The middle section is a very saturated space. It comprises the main headlines, about the most controversial and dramatic events of the day. It features

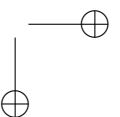
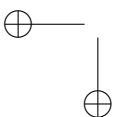


Figure 2: Front page of *24 Horas*

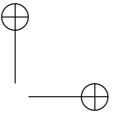
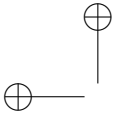
as well two or three coloured photos that portray public figures or ordinary people, according to the nature of the drama or scandal that is displayed. These pictures can be placed on the right or on the left side of the middle section. Main headlines are presented as thematically connected, although in a mixed and confused way. They are distinct only by virtue of their relative salience, as realised by size, boldness and contrast of colours and by the presence of a small lead about the main scandal of the day.

The band at the bottom of the page can display several news headlines and also ads, but does not present a regular pattern. The relative salience of these elements is realised by change of background colours, size and colour of letters, and use of pictures. On this edition, it features a picture of an unknown hairdresser who wants to change the hair of Nuno Gomes – a famous

Portuguese football – player on the left; the right side includes a picture of a TV star with a headline about the last event of a well-known reality show, and the extreme right contains an ad against a coloured background, and in a coloured frame. It functions as the real – in opposition with the upper band, the place of the ideal – by presenting a combination of news items mixing private and public aspects of the lives of public stars with pictures showing the actors involved in the stories. The upper section, the one next to the middle section, is the place for the newspaper masthead, but similarly to the other sections of the page, it has a saturated look, as it includes also promotional items due to seasonal reasons (Christmas time), showing in a clear way the commercial face of the newspaper. The right side of this band can be used with different purposes: it may feature another ad or, as it is the case of the front page under analysis, can offer extra space for the placement of a bigger picture that is connected with the main headline of the day. The highest top margin of the page comprises another ad. These are the elements presented as the ideal, with the masthead comprising the essence of the newspaper content and role as “the 24 hours watcher”, ready to denounce wrong doings and scandals, together with the seasonal promise of a richer Christmas.

The middle section is also structured along the dimensions of real and ideal. It is the most salient dramatic space of the *24 Horas* front page, due to font size and style, colours contrast created by the choice of red, blue and black backgrounds, the mixing of colours in the screaming headlines, and due to the eye-catching bigger size of the picture. The right upper side of the middle section displays a photo that portrays a controversial and powerful President of a football team: Pinto da Costa. He was by then a key-actor on a media novel about corruption, prostitution, football referees and managers, and justice, that is known by the name of *Apito Dourado*, the name used by the police to designate this secret operation. His picture is placed on the place of the ideal, against the screaming headlines of the middle section, which are all about details of the main event of the day - the last one of a series of scandals involving Pinto da Costa. The most salient element of this page is, without any doubt, the picture of Pinto da Costa, due to size, to placement in the right top, the place of the ideal: the drama that visually formulates the essence of the day’s event and solicits condemnation of his behaviour, and due to cultural and circumstantial reasons. The main central headline and the headline in the bottom of the picture of Pinto da Costa are relatively less salient, as they are





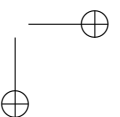
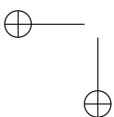
giving details, evidence of the involvement of Pinto da Costa in the scandal. How will a traditionally oriented reader react to this organized visual anarchy?

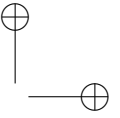
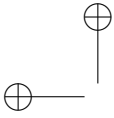
We have seen that, in spite of obvious differences, both newspapers present a centralized layout, and this might be explained by the still strong catholic nature of Portuguese culture, meaning that the readers of *JN* and *24H* are religious oriented. In spite of its quality character, when compared to the tabloid one, *JN* does not feature in its front page any full text and mixes public and private affairs although in a much lower level than *24H*. The predominance of the visual means that both newspapers speak to a reader who wants to get her or his perceptions immediately, directly, who does not want, or does not have time, to concentrate on an issue. Anyway, there are clear differences between *JN* and *24H*. The first gives their readers a larger and diverse view of the world, even if they are simplified, and the second by comparison is reductionist, offering its readers in a chaotic way a world of scandals, crime and sex, and so few resources for analysis.

## Simultaneous Verbal Protocols and Front Pages Reading

### Design and experiments

Participants in this reading exercise (N=16) were enrolled in secondary schools and in a circuit of adults surrounding students from the University of Minho in Portugal, 8 aged forty to fifty-five, and 8 aged fifteen to eighteen. They were purposively chosen in order to obtain a balance of numbers across age. All participation was volunteered. All subjects reported reading newspapers at least once a week. Verbal protocols were collected by audio tape during two days in the beginning of December 2004. The newspapers were placed on a table for support. The participants were scheduled for reading interview sessions where they were placed in a quiet office. After a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, volunteers were instructed to verbalize their reading of one front page for as long as they liked. They were asked to read it the same way as they normally read newspapers. They were told to stay within the front page and were left alone. The recorded verbalizations were fully transcribed.





### Experiment 1

Entry points and reading paths among younger subjects reading “quality newspapers”: the case of *JN* (8 subjects)

- Hypothesis 1: more visually oriented, less preference for words

### Experiment 2

Entry points and reading paths among older subjects reading tabloids: the case of *24 H* (8 subjects)

- Hypothesis 2: more words oriented, less preference for images

## Analysis of Results from Verbal Protocols

The front pages were segmented according to the results of the previous social semiotic analysis (see above). For each reader, I mapped the first two entry points and the sequence order (reading paths) in which the objects of the front pages caught their attention to the point they all diverge. The findings are organised according to the number of the experiment: Experiment 1 – Findings 1; Experiment 2 – Findings 2. After reporting the data, I summarise the main findings and present an example of a full reading path for each group.

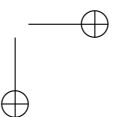
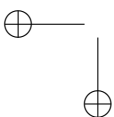
### Findings1: Younger people reading the front page of *JN*

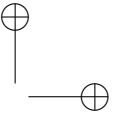
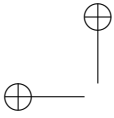
#### 1<sup>o</sup>Entry point

- The picture of Sampaio (on the bottom of the middle section): 5 readers
- The masthead (up in the middle section): 3 readers

#### 2<sup>o</sup> Entry point

- The picture of a Japanese football fan (in the middle of the left section): 6 readers
- The picture of Sampaio: 1 reader
- The main headline (under the masthead in the middle section): 1 reader





### Reading Paths

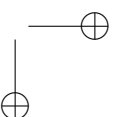
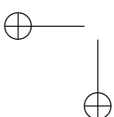
- From the picture of Sampaio to the photo of a Japanese football fan (from the bottom of the middle section up to the middle of the left section): 5 readers
- From the masthead to the picture of Sampaio (down to the bottom of the middle section): 1 reader
- From the masthead to the main headline (from the top of the middle section down to the centre of the middle section): 1 reader
- From the masthead to the picture of a Japanese football fan (from the top of the middle section down to the middle of the left section): 1 reader

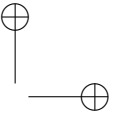
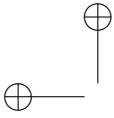
The majority of the younger readers chose images as preferred entry points. Those who read text chose the headmaster to do it, due to its shortness and colourful background. As to the other textual parts, the results show the mentioning of headlines. But these readers they do not really read across the headlines, rather they pick up some of their words and make connections between them. Regarding reading paths, all the readers entered the front page through the middle section, and none of them followed a linear reading path. The majority departed from the bottom of the middle section and from there up to the middle of the left section.

### Findings 2: older people reading the front page of *24H*

#### 1° Entry point

- The biggest headline (in the middle section): 2 readers
- The small headline above the biggest headline (on the left corner of the middle section): 2 readers
- The headmaster (in the upper section): 2 readers
- Pinto da Costa's picture (on the right, in between the middle section and the upper sections): 1
- The Christmas' ad (in the highest upper section): 1 reader





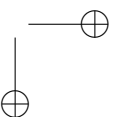
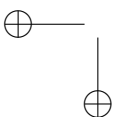
## 2º Entry point

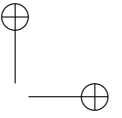
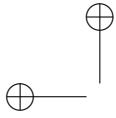
- Pinto da Costa's picture: 4
- The subtitle under the biggest headline: 2
- The biggest headline: 1
- The glasses' ad (in the right corner of the bottom section): 1

## Reading paths

- From the biggest headline in the middle section across to the picture of Pinto da Costa on the right: 2 readers
- From the small headline above the biggest headline on the left corner of the middle section down to the subtitle under the biggest headline: 2 readers
- From the headmaster in the upper section across to the picture of Pinto da Costa on the right: 2 readers
- From the picture of Pinto da Costa on the right, in between the middle section and the upper sections, down to the biggest main headline: 1 reader
- From the Christmas's ad on right of the highest upper section down to another ad on the right corner: 1 reader

Five older readers entered the page through the middle section and stayed there during the second stage. Written text (headlines and headmaster) was the first entry point of 6 readers. The majority of the subjects read the headlines of the middle section instead of mentioning the dominant photo of the page. This means that they prefer concrete information rather than the visual essentialisation of the day's event. Six of them followed the left to right logic of reading, along the line, and they all traverse the page going from top to bottom. One of them concentrated his attention on ads, showing through this choice his refusal or inability to enter into the page. See figure 4 for an example of a full reading path of the front page of *24H*.





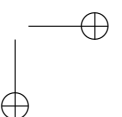
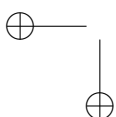
## Summary and Conclusions

Hypothesis 1 – younger readers are more visually oriented, and have less preference for words – and hypothesis 2 – older readers are more writing oriented, and have less preference for images – are supported by the data. When confronted with a tabloid newspaper, older readers persist in traditional, linear form of reading. When confronted with a relatively traditional page, younger readers show their preference for images and follow a non-linear reading path, showing through their reading choices their socialisation into the logic of the screen. Both groups seem to be constrained by the prescribed order of reading set up by the layouts. Comparatively, younger people are less constrained by the order of relevance set up on the page than older people, and their reading strategies are more flexible: they choose reading strategies that fit better the page they are dealing with, therefore showing a stronger agency. These findings provide tempered confirmations of assertions that age and its associated reading habits have an influence on the way newspaper front pages are read.

Obviously, this study has severe limitations due to its range of readers, artificial design, and limited number of newspapers. Future research is needed to validate and extend these findings. However, my intention has not been to generate generalizable conclusions, but to explore theoretical challenges and premises through empirically derived, reading patterns, and thus to contribute to reduce the gap that exists in literature about how young readers use newspapers. Also, I wanted to emphasise that the study of the interactions of readers and newspapers, printed or electronic, should integrate theoretical understandings of multimodality and visual social semiotics.

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